

## Narratives of resistance: Women's defiance against gender oppression in Bonnie Garmus' novel "Lessons in Chemistry"

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*Received:* 7 May 2025; *Revised:* 1 June 2025; *Accepted:* 2 June 2025

<https://doi.org/10.58712/se.v1i1.2>

**Abstract:** This article examines the multifaceted nature of women's resistance to gender oppression as depicted in Bonnie Garmus' novel "Lessons in Chemistry". Through a qualitative feminist literary criticism approach, the study analyzes the protagonist Elizabeth Zott's journey, highlighting her defiance against patriarchal norms in 1950s in America. Drawing on Simone De Beauvoir's existentialist feminist theory and James C. Scott's concepts of open and close resistance, the research uncovers how Elizabeth's actions-ranging from public advocacy on her television show to private assertions of identity-challenge both overt and subtle forms of societal control. The findings reveal that resistance in the novel is both individual and collective, manifesting as visible protest and everyday acts of empowerment. By foregrounding these diverse strategies, the article demonstrates how literature can reflect and inspire ongoing struggles for gender equality, positioning resistance as a dynamic force that redefines women's roles and catalyzes social change. Therefore, such studies on different literatures are recommended to conduct to ensure the writing quality and present moral values which are beneficial to adapt by the readers.

**Keywords:** resistance; feminist existentialism; woman in science; empowerment; agency

### 1. Introduction

The history of feminist movements is marked not only by the chronicling of women's oppression but, more importantly, by the enduring spirit of resistance that women have demonstrated in the face of persistent gender-based barriers. While much scholarship has documented the myriad forms of oppression faced by women-from exclusion in education and the workforce to the denial of political rights and autonomy-there is a pressing need to foreground the narratives of resistance that challenge and disrupt these oppressive structures. Resistance is not merely a reaction to injustice; it is a proactive, dynamic force that redefines women's roles, aspirations, and identities within patriarchal societies ([Lee et al., 2025](#)).

Bonnie Garmus' *Lessons in Chemistry* serves as a compelling literary testament to the power and complexity of women's resistance ([Garmus, 2022](#)). Set in the 1950s, the novel follows Elizabeth Zott, a brilliant chemist whose journey is emblematic of the struggle against deeply entrenched gender norms. Elizabeth's story is not simply one of endurance in the face of discrimination-her narrative is a vivid chronicle of defiance. She resists not only the overt barriers imposed by male-dominated institutions but also the subtle, internalized forms of misogyny perpetuated by society and, at times, by other women. Her refusal to conform, her determination to pursue scientific inquiry, and her

efforts to inspire other women to challenge their prescribed roles collectively illustrate the multifaceted nature of resistance.

Existentialist feminism, as articulated by De Beauvoir, is rooted in existentialist philosophy, which emphasizes individual freedom, choice, and responsibility. De Beauvoir argues that women are not born with an essence that makes them subordinate; rather, “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (De Beauvoir, 2014). This means that gender roles and oppression are socially constructed, not biologically determined. Existentialist feminism calls for women to assert their subjectivity, to transcend the roles imposed on them, and to create their own meaning and identity through authentic choices (Edwards, 2021; Shepherd, 2018). Simone De Beauvoir, in her seminal work *The Second Sex*, introduces the concept of the Other to describe how women have been historically positioned as fundamentally different from-and subordinate to-men. In patriarchal societies, man is considered the norm or the “Self,” while woman is constructed as “the Other”: the outsider, the deviation, the one defined only in relation to man. De Beauvoir famously writes, “He is the Subject, he is the Absolute-she is the Other” (De Beauvoir, 2014).

In *Lessons in Chemistry*, Elizabeth Zott’s experiences reflect this othering process. Despite her intelligence and scientific talent, she is persistently treated as an anomaly in the male-dominated world of 1950s science. Her colleagues and society at large see her not as a scientist in her own right, but as a woman who happens to be in science-her gender always marks her as different, as Other. This is evident in the way she is excluded from opportunities, dismissed in meetings, and even fired for becoming pregnant. The novel thus dramatizes how women’s ambitions and identities are constrained by their status as “the Other,” echoing De Beauvoir’s analysis. Elizabeth Zott embodies existentialist feminist resistance. She refuses to passively accept the roles society assigns her-as a secretary, a housewife, or a mere assistant to male scientists. Instead, she insists on defining herself as a scientist, a mother, and an autonomous individual. Her resistance is not only personal but also collective: through her television cooking show, she encourages other women to question their prescribed roles and to pursue their own ambitions. In this way, Elizabeth’s journey mirrors De Beauvoir’s call for women to move from object (“the Other”) to subject-to become the authors of their own lives.

*Lessons in Chemistry* thus provides a powerful narrative of resistance that aligns with existentialist feminist theory. The novel shows how women, positioned as “the Other,” face systemic barriers in both public and private spheres. However, it also illustrates the existentialist feminist imperative to resist these limitations-not just by seeking personal fulfillment, but by challenging the very structures that perpetuate women’s otherness. Elizabeth Zott’s defiance is both an act of self-assertion and a catalyst for broader social change. By refusing to accept her “othered” status and by inspiring other women to do the same, she enacts the existentialist feminist vision of liberation: the transformation of women from passive objects into active subjects of their own stories. Resistance is fundamentally a response to and a fight against existing social stigmas and stereotypes imposed on women, utilizing the strengths and resources available to them (Lwamba et al., 2022). Although the feminist movement is not always explicitly labeled as a resistance movement, it has long functioned as a form of opposition against male domination, patriarchal systems, and various forms of oppression upheld by both state and non-state actors across different regions and historical periods (Courpasson & Vallas, 2016). Resistance takes many forms, including the refusal to accept patriarchal norms and stereotypes, encouraging women to recognize their own value, and spreading awareness to combat oppression. These acts, even when subtle or personal, constitute meaningful resistance.

James C. Scott’s framework distinguishes two primary types of resistance: open and close resistance. Open resistance involves direct, public, and visible opposition to authority, often through organized actions that challenge power structures despite the risk of retaliation. In contrast, close resistance, or

everyday resistance, consists of subtle, close, and often disguised acts of defiance that quietly undermine authority without provoking direct confrontation or punishment (Scott, 1985). Both forms are crucial to understanding how women resist gender oppression, whether through overt activism or everyday acts of dissent. In *Lessons in Chemistry*, resistance emerges on two forms: close and open resistance. Elizabeth's unwavering pursuit of her scientific career despite systemic exclusion, her vocal opposition to workplace discrimination, and her role as a catalyst for other women's empowerment all exemplify resistance as both an individual and collective act. The novel moves beyond depicting women as passive victims of oppression; instead, it celebrates their agency, resilience, and capacity to incite change. Elizabeth's journey demonstrates that resistance can manifest as persistence in the face of adversity, as vocal advocacy for equality, and as the creation of new possibilities for oneself and others.

This article explores the multifaceted nature of women's resistance, emphasizing how both open and close forms of defiance operate to challenge and destabilize patriarchal dominance. By broadening the understanding of resistance beyond visible protests to include everyday acts of empowerment and defiance, this study highlights the diverse strategies the women employ to reclaim agency and confront systemic gender inequalities. Ultimately, *Lessons in Chemistry* offers a narrative where resistance is not an isolated act but a contagious force, encouraging women to recognize their worth, claiming their space in public life, and supporting others in doing the same. By putting resistance as the primary lens of analysis, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of how literature can both reflect and inspire the ongoing struggle for gender equality.

## 2. Methods

This research employs a qualitative feminist literary criticism approach to analyze *Lessons in Chemistry* by Garmus (2022). The study focuses on exploring women's resistance against gender oppression as depicted in the novel. Data are collected through close reading of the text, identifying words, phrases, and sentences that reveal acts of defiance and empowerment by the female protagonist. This method allows for an in-depth understanding of the nuanced ways where resistance is portrayed beyond overt rebellion, including subtle and everyday forms of defiance.

The analysis is grounded in Simone De Beauvoir's existentialist feminist theory, which emphasizes women's struggle to transcend their socially constructed roles as "the Other" and assert their subjectivity through authentic choices. By applying this theoretical lens, the study interprets the protagonist's resistance as both an individual assertion of freedom and a challenge to patriarchal norms. The research also integrates James C. Scott's concepts of open and close resistance to categorize and deepen the understanding of the various forms of defiance depicted.

Data analysis involves thematic coding of relevant textual excerpts, focusing on how resistance is enacted in different social contexts within the novel. The study uses feminist theory to interpret these themes, highlighting the protagonist's journey toward self-definition and empowerment. This qualitative, theory-driven method facilitates a comprehensive exploration of resistance as a dynamic and multifaceted response to gender oppression in literature.

## 3. Results and discussion

### 3.1 Open resistance

Open resistance refers to acts of defiance or opposition that are public, explicit, and confrontational. Unlike everyday resistance, which is subtle and often hidden to avoid direct reprisal, open resistance

is visible and intentionally challenges authority, norms, or structures of power ([Athirah & Hidayana, 2023](#); [Huysmans & Nogueira, 2024](#); [Wang, 2024](#)). In *Lessons in Chemistry* Elizabeth Zott conduct open resistance through her tv program, she challenges the status quo and encourage woman to pursue her dream.

*"It is my experience that far too many people do not appreciate the work and sacrifice that goes into being a wife, a mother, a woman. Well, I am not one of them. At the end of our thirty minutes together, we will have done something worth doing. We will have created something that will not go unnoticed. We will have made supper. And it will matter."* ([Garmus, 2022](#))

This statement publicly confronts the widespread cultural invisibility of women's domestic labor. Elizabeth's framing of cooking as "something worth doing" that "will not go unnoticed" challenges the dominant narrative that housework is trivial or unskilled. By elevating the act of making supper to a meaningful, intellectual endeavor, she resists patriarchal devaluation of women's work. This open resistance uses the mass media platform of television to reach and empower a broad female audience, encouraging them to recognize their own value and reject societal norms that diminish their contributions. It reflects Elizabeth's role as a catalyst for social change, making resistance visible and collective. Another quotation supports the main character way to fight the status quo of woman shows through her interaction with audience in the cooking show.

*"But I do believe in the people who made the food possible," Elizabeth continued. "The farmers, the pickers, the truckers, the grocery store shelf stockers. But most of all, I believe in you, Edna. Because you made the meal that nourishes your family. Because of you, a new generation flourishes. Because of you, others live."* ([Garmus, 2022](#))

Here, Elizabeth explicitly acknowledges the often-unseen labor behind food production and preparation, centering the woman who cooks as a vital agent sustaining life and future generations. This recognition not only honors women's work but also instills pride and agency in her audience. By naming "Edna" directly, Elizabeth personalizes the message, breaking the isolation women may feel and fostering solidarity. This act of raising awareness is a form of open resistance that challenges internalized oppression and inspires women to demand social change by recognizing their essential role in society.

### 3.2 Close resistance

Main character, Elizabeth Zott, is on of the smartest chemist that her company ever had, not only smart in chemistry, she also has good way of thinking. The way she is clearly stated her opinion to her partner, Chirst Evan, shows her disagreement towards status quo at that time. The main character is a person that really want to step out from the current status quo about woman that always belong and depend to man.

*I refuse. And even if we took all the proper legal steps to ensure my name won't change, it will still change. Everyone will call me Mrs. Calvin Evans; I will become Mrs. Calvin Evans. Every Christmas card, every bank statement, every notice from the Bureau of Internal Revenue will all come to Mr. and Mrs. Calvin Evans. Elizabeth Zott, as we know her, will cease to exist."* "And being Mrs. Calvin Evans is absolutely the worst thing that could ever happen to you," he said, his face collapsed in misery. "I want to be Elizabeth Zott," she said. "It's important to me." ([Garmus, 2022](#))

Elizabeth's refusal to take her husband's surname is a profound act of personal defiance against patriarchal tradition, which legally and socially erases women's identities upon marriage. This quiet

but powerful resistance asserts her autonomy and subjectivity, refusing to be subsumed under male identity. It aligns with Simone De Beauvoir's existentialist feminism, which emphasizes women's freedom to define themselves beyond socially imposed roles as "the Other." By insisting on her name, Elizabeth claims her individuality and professional identity as a scientist, signaling that her worth is independent of marital status. This close resistance is subtle and private but symbolically disrupts the patriarchal system that treats women as property.

*Then she looked right through the camera lens, and almost as if she divined it, directly into the astonished faces of Mrs. George Fillis's five children sprawled in front of the TV in Kernville, their eyes open wide, their mouths agape, as if they had just seen their mother for the very first time. "Boys, set the table," Elizabeth commanded. "Your mother needs a moment to herself." (Garmus, 2022)*

This recurring phrase on Elizabeth's cooking show subtly challenges the gendered division of domestic labor by involving boys in household tasks traditionally assigned to girls or women. Although it is a small, everyday act, it strategically influences socialization and gender norms for the next generation. This form of close resistance quietly undermines patriarchal expectations by promoting shared family responsibility. Its power lies in repetition and normalization, gradually reshaping societal beliefs about gender roles. This everyday resistance exemplifies how change can be enacted through persistent, non-confrontational acts that evade direct backlash yet accumulate transformative effects over time (Christianson et al., 2021). These analyses show how Elizabeth Zott's resistance operates on multiple levels—from bold public challenges to intimate personal defiance—reflecting the complexity of resisting gender oppression in *Lessons in Chemistry*. Her actions embody feminist ideals of agency, autonomy, and collective empowerment.

#### 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, *Lessons in Chemistry* by Bonnie Garmus offers a powerful literary exploration of women's resistance against gender oppression, both in public and private spheres. The character of Elizabeth Zott exemplifies how resistance can take multiple forms, from bold, open defiance on a public platform to subtle, everyday acts of personal autonomy. Through her television program, Elizabeth actively challenges the devaluation of women's domestic labor and inspires women to recognize their own agency and worth, making her resistance visible and collective. At the same time, her refusal to adopt her husband's surname and her efforts to redistribute domestic responsibilities within the family reflect close forms of resistance that quietly undermine patriarchal norms and assert her individuality. These acts, analyzed through the lens of Simone De Beauvoir's existentialist feminism, highlight the transformative potential of women moving from being "the Other" to self-determined subjects. The novel demonstrates that resistance is not only a response to oppression but also a proactive force that redefines women's roles and identities, ultimately contributing to broader social change.

Based on these findings, it is suggested that future research further explore the diverse strategies of women's resistance in literature, particularly through comparative studies with other works that center on female protagonists challenging patriarchal systems. Scholars should also consider intersectional approaches to examine how factors such as race, class, and sexuality intersect with gender in shaping experiences of oppression and resistance. In educational settings, texts like *Lessons in Chemistry* can be used to foster critical discussions about gender roles, agency, and social transformation. Furthermore, the insights from this study can inform empowerment initiatives and policy development that support women's autonomy and challenge systemic barriers in both domestic and professional contexts. Ultimately, recognizing and valuing both open and close forms of resistance is essential for advancing gender equality and inspiring continued progress in the ongoing struggle against oppression.

## Author's declaration

## Author contribution

**Salwa Felisa Syafitri:** conceptualization, data collection, data analysis, writing-original draft.  
**Zhyldyz Tunguchbaevna Takenova:** data curation, reviewing and editing-final manuscript.

## Funding statement

This study received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

## Data availability

The authors state that the data of this study are available to access for educational purposes only by sending a request e-mail to the corresponding author. It is strictly prohibited to use the data for commercial and personal uses without any permission from the authors.

## Acknowledgement

The authors would like to thank all parties who have supported the research process and article completion, particularly to English Language and Literature Department and Language Laboratory Staff of Universitas Negeri Padang for providing helps related to the study.

## Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest in this research and publication.

## Ethical clearance

This research did not involve human participants, animals, or any sensitive data requiring ethical approval.

## AI statement

This article is the original work of the author without using AI tools for writing sentences and/or creating/editing table and figures in this manuscript.

## Publisher's and Journal's Note

Researcher and Lecturer Society as the publisher, and the editor of Scientific English state that there is no conflict of interest towards this article publication.

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